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*HEBREW OSTRACA FROM SAMARIA*<sup>1</sup>

In 1908 Harvard University began the exploration of the large hill in central Palestine which marks the site of the ancient Hebrew capital Samaria. The chief results of the year's work<sup>2</sup> were the discovery of a Roman statue of heroic size (probably representing Augustus), a well-preserved Roman altar, an imposing stairway, about eighty feet broad, and the massive foundation-walls of a large building, the connection of which with the Herodian temple to Augustus was considered possible.

The campaign of 1909,<sup>3</sup> in charge of Professor George A. Reisner, aided by Mr. Clarence S. Fisher, furnished the proof that the temple just mentioned, at the summit of the hill, was really the work of Herod. Underneath these Roman remains was recovered part of a massive Hebrew structure, believed to be the palace of Omri and Ahab, consisting of a series of chambers grouped around courts. On the western side of the hill the gateway, flanked by two round towers, was investigated, and was found to be Roman work resting on older square towers of the Greek period, which in turn occupied the site of still older Hebrew towers. On the eastern side of the hill the extensive ruin, with its monolithic columns still in position, was shown to be a basilica adjoining the forum of the Herodian city.

In 1910 the explorations were continued at all the points named, but especially in and about the palace building at the summit. This building, though not yet completely explored, is now known to have covered more than one and a half acres, and shows four periods of construction, tentatively assigned to Omri, Ahab, Jehu, and Jeroboam II.

The belief that the building was originally erected by Omri and Ahab was based on archaeological grounds, and seems greatly

<sup>1</sup> Based on a special report from Professor George A. Reisner.

<sup>2</sup> See this Review for January, 1909.

<sup>3</sup> See this Review for April, 1910.



strengthened by the discovery of an alabaster vase inscribed with the name of Ahab's contemporary, Osorkon II of Egypt.

Of unusual interest is a series of ostraca found during the past summer at the level of the Osorkon vase, and comprising some seventy-five fragments of pottery inscribed with records or memoranda in the ancient Hebrew character.

That these inscriptions were originally written not on jars but on fragments appears from several considerations: (1) The beginning and ending of the successive lines of writing were nicely adapted to the size of the fragment, which in many cases involved crowding at the end of a line or carrying part of the word to the next line. (2) The writing crosses the turning lines on the fragments at various angles, whereas labels on jars are regularly written horizontally. (3) Several fragments, each with a separate inscription, fit together, and were therefore originally parts of the same vessel, whereas it is obvious that the same jar would not need more than one label. (4) In two cases the inscriptions seem to be labels written on jars before breaking, but these are distinguished by great brevity and by the large amount of unwritten surface.

The script in which these ostraca are written is the Phoenician, which was widely current in antiquity. It is very different from the so-called square character, in which the existing Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible are written. It is practically identical with that of the Siloam Tunnel inscription, and this fact settles at a stroke the disputed question whether that inscription can be as old as the time of Hezekiah. It is also the same as that of the Moabite Stone of Mesha dating from the ninth century B.C. This correspondence would suggest the eighth or ninth century as the date of the ostraca, and this view is confirmed by the place of discovery, which would cause them to be assigned to the time of Ahab.

The inscriptions are written in ink with a reed pen in an easy, flowing hand and show a pleasing contrast to the stiff forms of Phoenician inscriptions cut in stone. The graceful curves give evidence of a skill which comes only with long practice.

In many of the inscriptions the ink is so well preserved that the readings are subject to no doubt, and in only a few cases is there



uncertainty. Such distinctness after twenty-eight centuries in a damp soil is a marvel.

The reading of the ostraca is facilitated by the dots or strokes of ink, which in accordance with ancient usage divide the words from one another. There is much sameness in the records, so that on many of the broken ostraca the missing portions can be supplied with certainty.

With two exceptions all the ostraca seem to have been dated, though the date is in some cases broken away. This date, composed of the words "in the year" followed by a numeral, stands nearly always at the beginning. The years mentioned are the ninth and tenth, which are always spelled in full, and two others, apparently the eleventh and the thirteenth, which are always expressed by figures. No day or month is given, nor, from the nature of the case, is any needed, because in stating the age of wine or oil the year alone is sufficient. The king's name also is not given, but doubtless the years of the reigning king are meant. In all probability this was Ahab, as we have already seen.

In content the inscriptions are brief memoranda concerning oil and wine. The name of the owner is usually given, as well as that of the person or place from which the object came. The translation of a few of the ostraca will make this clear<sup>4</sup>:—

No. 5. *In the tenth year. For [i.e. belonging to] Shemaryô.<sup>5</sup> From the Tell. A jar of fine oil.*

No. 6. *In the tenth year. Wine of the vineyard of the Tell. With a jar of fine oil.*

No. 8. *In the tenth year. From Saq. For Gadyô. A jar of fine oil.*

No. 12. *In the tenth year. From Yasat. A jar of fine oil. For 'Akhino'am.*

<sup>4</sup> The numbers given refer to the enumeration in Professor Reisner's special report on this subject.

<sup>5</sup> It is of course often doubtful what vowels to supply in reading these names, and the doubt is increased by the infrequency of the vowel letters. Where the same name occurs in the Old Testament, the vowels represented by the masoretic points have usually been inserted.



No. 13. *In the tenth year. From 'Abi'ezer. For Shemaryô. A jar of old wine for 'Asâ. From the Tell.*

No. 19. *In the 11th year. From Shemîda'. For Kheleş, 'Aph-şakh, Ba'alâ [and] Zeker.*

No. 33. [In] *the 11th year. From Sarar. For Yeda'yô, Mar-anyô, Gady[ô]. . . .*

No. 42. *In the ninth year. From Shaphtan. For Ba'alzamar. A jar of old wine.*

No. 47. *In the 11th year. From 'Abi'ezer. For 'Asâ, 'Akhi-melek, [and] Ba'alâ. From 'Elnathan.<sup>6</sup>*

No. 49. *In the 11th year. From Kheleg. For 'Asâ, 'Akhi-melek, Ba'alâ, [and] Ba'alme'onî.*

No. 50. *In the ninth year. From Yaşat. For 'Abino'am. A jar of old wine.*

No. 51. *In the 11th year. For Badyô.<sup>7</sup> The vineyard of the Tell.*

Simple as is the reading of these records, the interpretation is not always so certain, especially when the names of several men are mentioned. But in general the ostraca seem to be labels attached to jars, or groups of jars, in the cellar or store-house, giving date, ownership, and origin of the jars, with the nature of their contents. Where no owner is mentioned, as is the case with most of the jars from the Tell, the palace is probably the owner. This Tell, or Vineyard of the Tell, was perhaps one of the royal vineyards. Where several names of men are mentioned, we have perhaps cases of joint ownership, whether of a single jar or of a

<sup>6</sup> The copy of the ostrakon reads *m* as the third letter of this name, but there is a break of the fragment across the letter. Since *m* and *n* are very much alike, it may be suspected that the break has obscured the reading. If, however, *m* be the correct reading, we may have here an error of the Hebrew scribe; of such errors at least two others seem to occur in the ostraca. 'Elnathan seems the more likely form of the word.

<sup>7</sup> The reading of the first letter in this name is doubtful.



group of jars of wine or oil. In this regard No. 14 is instructive, the names of several owners being followed by the number of jars belonging to each.

Of special interest are the proper names found on these ostraca. From the nature of the records the names of gods appear only as elements in the formation of the names of men. Thus the general word for God, 'El, occurs in 'Elîsha', 'Elnathan (see note 6, preceding page), and possibly in 'Elîsh (abbreviated from 'Elîsha'(?)), 'Elbâ, and 'Elâ. The quiescents being rarely expressed in these ostraca, the pronunciation must in many cases be considered as tentative only.

As might be expected, *Ba'al* occurs in several names, as *Ba'alâ*, *Ba'alzamar*, *Ba'alâzakar*, <sup>8</sup> *Ba'alme'onî*, and *'Abiba'al*. The Book of Kings reports a great development of Baal-worship in Israel during the reign of Ahab, whose queen, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre, was specially devoted to this cult.

The name of Israel's god occurs with about equal frequency. Naturally it nowhere occurs in the full form *Y H W H*, any more than in Biblical compounds. But the form *Y H W*, common in Biblical compounds, and the form *Y H*, found both separately and in compounds, are also absent in the ostraca. If the *W* is consonantal, the pronunciation may have been *Yawa*; if vocalic, it was probably *Yô*, as in so many Biblical names.

In two names the *Y W* forms the first half of the word, namely, *Yôyada'* and *Yôyashib*. In six others it is the second element, as *Badyô*, *Gadyô*, *Yeda'yô* (the same as *Yôyada'* just given, the two elements of the name being reversed), *Maranyô*, *'Egelyô*, and *Shemaryô*. Of these names *Gadyô* occurs on twelve of the ostraca, *Yeda'yô* on two, and *Shemaryô* on four.

Of names of men a considerable number are found, many of them having Biblical equivalents. A selection of these is here given, and in the parallel column the equivalents, or words of similar formation, from the old Testament:—

<sup>8</sup> The first element is written here *Ba'ala'*, with final 'ain, which seems to be a scribal error for *Ba'alâ*, with final 'aleph.



OSTRACA	BIBLE
'Abiba'al	'Abi'el, 'Abiyah <sup>9</sup>
'Abi'ezer	'Abi'ezer
'Akhimelek	'Akhimelek
'Akhino'am	'Akhino'am
'Elá	'Elá
'Elisha'	'Elisha'
'Asá	'Asá
Ba'alá	
Ba'alzamar	
Ba'alázakar	Zekaryah
Ba'alme'oní	Ba'alme'ôn
Gadyô	Gaddi'el
Gerá	Gerá
Kheles	Kheles
Khanan	Khanan
Khanan'am	'Elí'am
Yeda'yô	Yeda'yah
Yôyada'	Yôyada'
Yôyashib	Elyashib
Yo'ash	Yô'ash
Meriba'al	Meriba'al
Maranyô	
Nathan	Nathan
'Abdá	'Abdá
'Egelyô	'Ari'el
'Uzzá	'Uzzá
Raphá	Raphá
Sheba'	Sheba'
Shemída' (Shemyada'?)	Shemída'
Shemaryô	Shemaryah

It is interesting to note that, while some of these names are mentioned several times in the Bible, a great many of them occur in the account of the reign of David. But this is not surprising, since the interval between David and Ahab is only about one century.

Of the names of places mentioned in the Ostraca *SKM* must be *Shechem*. Other place-names seem to be *Khasoreth*, *Shaphtan*, 'Azá, *Yasat*, *Qasah*, and *Saq*.

<sup>9</sup>The letters *a*, *i*, *o* with circumflex above them (*á*, *í*, *ó*,) are used in the transliteration of names in this article to indicate the presence of 'aleph, *yod*, and *waw* respectively.



Now it is evident that these ostraca have great interest for the epigraphist and the Hebraist. They are the earliest specimens of Hebrew writing which have ever been found, and in amount they exceed by far all known ancient Hebrew inscriptions. Moreover, they are the first Palestinian records of this nature to be found. Of particular interest, too, are the proper names, especially those compounded with the names *Ba'al* and *Yô*.

It is not improbable that thousands of such records may exist at Samaria. In some part of the hill, less overturned than the summit has been by the burrowing of later builders, it is likely that multitudes of business documents await the explorer, documents giving records of sale, barter, contract, and all phases of private and social transactions.

More than this, may we not even hope for historical records? We know that the kings of Israel had their court annalists. And while we may be sure that their work was committed mainly to perishable material, other parts of it may have been written on stone, pottery, or clay. Such possibility is enough to kindle the imagination of every student of Palestinian history.

With this year's campaign the first Harvard expedition to Samaria closes. The work of preparing the results for publication is now well advanced. Including the publication, the cost of the undertaking has been sixty-five thousand dollars, which is fifteen thousand dollars more than the original gift for this purpose. By these generous gifts, which have made possible this first expedition, Mr. Jacob H. Schiff has added another to his notable contributions to the cause of learning.

But so large is the area of ancient Samaria, that the great bulk of the exploration still remains to be done. While the hill has been mainly attacked at what is probably its most complicated, and architecturally its richest, portion, and while the results in certain directions have far exceeded our expectations, it is usually the unexpected that happens in exploration, and the other parts of the hill may yield treasures more surprising than Herod's temple, Ahab's palace, or the ostraca records.

It is therefore earnestly to be hoped that the work may not stop with this first expedition, but that other patrons of research may see the opportunity for further discovery which the hill of



Samaria presents. The claim of Samaria, in comparison with Greek and Roman sites, is particularly strong, since remains from classical antiquity are already abundant, whereas, notwithstanding much excavation in Palestine, the work at Samaria is the first to bring to light important remains of the early Hebrew times.

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